

Searching for care



Keelin Daly/Staff photo

Jacqueline Jean Claude on the stoop of her Greenwich home where she lives with two foster children. There is a shortage of foster families in Greenwich leaving Jean Claude as one of only two foster families in town.

Foster parents in town virtually non-existent

By Andrew Shaw
Staff Writer

The Arcuris were excited, scared and nervous all at once last October as they finished their state certification to become foster parents.

Carolyn and Geno, married for 15 years, heard about the dire need for foster families and had decided to ditch their original plan to adopt. They completed a 10-week course and passed a home examination and interviews by the state to become certified.

And then their wish to become a foster family came quicker — a lot quicker — than they imagined.

"We weren't even certified two hours and we got a call, 'Hey, do you want a kid? We've got two kids ready,'" Geno Arcuri, 41, recalled.

At 6 p.m. that evening, a 2-year-old boy arrived at their door. At 11 p.m., a 6-year-old boy arrived. The Arcuris, who have no children of their own, were unprepared for such a quick turnaround and rushed out to buy clothes and supplies.

"All they had were the clothes on their backs," Geno Arcuri said.

The Arcuris are a rarity. In Greenwich, there is only one other foster family, not including informal foster care arrangements between family relations. There's a desperate need for

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This is my home."

Sandra Colon
foster child

more foster families in Greenwich and the rest of the state, according to the state's Foster Care and Adoptive Services.

"We have an extreme shortage of foster homes," said Jill West, a social work supervisor with Foster Care and Adoptive Services, based in Norwalk.

The agency covers towns from Greenwich to Westport. West said there are 29 foster families in this area. However, there are about 200 children needing a home in this area; no specific numbers are available for Greenwich. The shortage of Greenwich foster parents forces the agency to send children elsewhere, often to the greater Bridgeport area, West said.

Sheila Bowles, director of the foster care program for the nonprofit Family and Children's Agency in Norwalk, specializes in helping the state find homes for children with behavioral

or medical conditions. Bowles said she can't recall any Greenwich family volunteering to become a foster parent for one of the children in her program.

"They prefer to give a donation," Bowles said of Greenwich residents.

The state's Foster Care and Adoptive Services has been appealing to Fairfield County residents to sign up. The agency wants to explain how foster care works, as many people have false assumptions about it, West said, such as believing that there are enough foster homes in the system already, or that the child would have too many behavioral or emotional problems to handle.

Differences of race and ethnicity between potential foster parents and foster children are also a factor, but the Arcuris said they found their concerns about this were quickly dispelled. One of their foster children is black, and Carolyn Arcuri said she and her husband were apprehensive about that at first.

Being white, they thought they wanted a child that "looked like them," she said. But the couple quickly realized that the children didn't care about race so they shouldn't either, and that their emotional investment in the children overtook the concerns they had anyway.

Foster care

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West recently appealed to Fairfield County residents to become foster parents in a letter to the editors of newspapers in the county that detailed all of the support services available to foster families.

"Because they (potential foster parents) don't know what to expect and might have young children of their own at home, they worry about incorporating a foster child into their household," West said.

Greenwich's Jacqueline Jean Claude, the other foster parent in town, said she doesn't understand why there's a lack of people wanting to become foster parents.

Jean Claude, 59, has looked after two teenagers for the past six years, and she said she would take in more if she had enough room in her three-bedroom house.

The parental rights of the girls have been terminated, meaning they are permanently under Jean Claude's care. That's fine with Sandra Colon, 15, one of the two teens, who said she's glad to have found a long-term home after bouncing around to seven different foster homes before she and her half-sister came to Jean Claude in December of 2001.

"It just makes me feel good that someone cares for me. This is my home," said Sandra, a basketball player and honor roll student at Greenwich High School entering her sophomore year.

Sandra said she's looking forward to attending college, which will be mostly tuition-free because of state reimbursement. For the past three weeks, Colon has been in Hawaii attending a camp where she is scuba diving, exploring volcanoes and hiking across the islands. The \$4,500 cost was covered by various state grants.

"There are a lot of opportunities," Sandra said, adding that she doubts any of those opportunities would have worked out if she had stayed in New Haven

with her birth family.

Although she never married, Jean Claude said she always wanted children, which became a pressing desire after she was diagnosed with cancer, which she has since overcome.

"You face your mortality. I regretted not having kids," said Jean Claude, a statistical analyst for a Greenwich insurance company.

With the help of community programs, helpful neighbors and state assistance, Jean Claude said she has greatly enjoyed being a foster mother, even if it isn't always easy.

"We sort of saved each other," she said. "I don't even remember not having them in my life."

The Arcuris' foster children are in a different situation from Jean Claude's, in that they are expected to return their biological parents, but on a timeline that can be as unpredictable as their arrival was.

Five days after the Arcuris' foster boys arrived, the court ordered them to be returned to their original family. Just like that, the Arcuris were back to an empty house and working for their event coordination business, Carolyn Dempsey Design Inc., in Port Chester, N.Y.

Physically and mentally exhausted from the "whirlwind week," Carolyn Arcuri said they decided they weren't ready to take more children, despite repeated calls from the state.

After a few months of introspection, though, they changed their minds.

"We wanted to make sure we were doing this for selfless reasons," she said.

And then, a three-year-old girl was placed in their home in late January. Carolyn Arcuri recalls the toddler crying herself to sleep at night, missing her birth mother.

"It's terrifying to her. She cried herself to sleep, and I cried myself to sleep," she said.

A month went by, and both sides became accustomed to

Foster care facts

- Ideal foster families are adults — not necessarily married couples — living in stable home environments where there have not been any major life changes such as a divorce in recent months, so foster children can be assured of having stability.

- Children are placed in temporary foster care usually because their birth parents are involved in legal problems such as criminal proceedings or custody disputes. The children often stay in foster care until their birth parents can prove they can provide a healthy, safe living environment. That can be a matter of days or may never happen, which terminates the birth parents' rights to the child.

- Officials try to find foster parents who live close to a child's birth family, so the child has continuity with school, friends and the community, and so foster families can have contact with birth families.

- Foster parents don't go at it alone. A social worker makes

visits at least once a week. Counseling for the child and for the family is available for free.

- Foster families also get financial support from the state. They receive a monthly stipend. Gene and Carolyn Arcuri receive about \$700 per child, while a foster parent of a child with special medical needs receives up to \$1,385. The child's medical insurance is covered by the state. There are other reimbursements for extracurricular activities and camps.

College tuition is mostly paid for as well. But foster care officials and foster parents said people are probably not in foster care for the money, if they are being responsible parents. With food, clothes, prescriptions, toys and other expenses, Carolyn Arcuri said there's no way they make money out of it.

- The child's medical insurance is covered by the state.

— Andrew Shaw

the new living situation. While staying in constant contact with the girl's family, the Arcuris have helped the girl get used to going to restaurants, developing a personal hygiene routine and going to preschool, where she has since thrived.

"She's full of life, whereas before, she wasn't," Carolyn Arcuri said.

The tools she's developed will help her when her birth family is ready to care for her again, Carolyn Arcuri said.

More months went by, and then the two boys the Arcuris looked after in the fall came back, this time for a longer stay. The Arcuris have tried to expose the boys to new experiences too, like going on vacation.

The boys are expected to return to their birth family again at the end of the summer, and that presents a new challenge for the Arcuris.

Seeing the children leave will be difficult, they said, because they have become emotionally attached to them, but they are also proud of how the children have developed.

"Maybe this was our calling," Carolyn Arcuri said. "It was all worth it."

Other Greenwich families should experience the power of making a difference in a child's life, she said.

"It's a perfect opportunity for people in Greenwich to realize there's a need," she said. "Just try it once."